

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT  
NORTH ADAMS

**INFORMANT: ROBERT DIODATI**  
**INTERVIEWER: ROBERT GABRIELSKY**  
**DATE: FEBRUARY 23, 1989**

**G = GABRIELSKY**  
**D = DIODATI**

**SG-NA-T013**

Interview begins with interviewer in mid-sentence:

G: . . . Scholar and residence at Western Heritage State Park, Western Gateway Heritage State Park in North Adams, Massachusetts. Uh, interviewing Robert Diodati for the Shifting Gears Oral History Project. Um, the date is February 23rd, 1989 and uh (--) Okay, first, where were you born?

D: I was born in North Adams, Mass.

G: Uh, where were your grandparents from?

D: My grandparents were, on both sides of the family, were from Italy.

G: Do you know where in Italy?

D: Yes. My uh, paternal grandparents were from [Castel Disandro] in the Province of Abruzzi. And my maternal grandparents were from a town called [Atenoicana?] in the Province of Salerno, which is south of Naples.

G: Umhm, umhm. Do you have a recollection of your grandparents? Do you know them, or?

D: I have recollection of both of my grandfathers. My grandmother, maternal grandmother died when my mother was nine years old. And I was two years old when my paternal grandmother died.

G: Uh, what did your grandfathers do for a living?

D: My paternal grandfather, Michael Diodati, was a shoemaker in the true sense of the word. He was not a cobbler, but he did become a cobbler when he came to this country. He made shoes in Italy and when he came to this country he also made shoes, custom made, and also was a cobbler. My other grandfather (--)

G: I haven't heard that in years. [Phone rings] I think that's a real New England uh, [D: cobbler?] point of view. No. I grew up in southern New Jersey and my uh, we would always talk about going to the shoemaker, which basically you need heels, [D: yeah] or something like that.

D: Well shoemaker is a term that we [G: right] generally use here, but I use the word cobbler because that is actually the word.

G: Sure, and there had to be a guy who was from Boston. He went to Springfield College. He was a (--) My mother worked in a uh, worked in the "Y". He was a "Y" secretary. And she would always say, "oh, I have to send me to the shoemaker." He would always correct her. He's say, you mean he doesn't make shoes, he's a cobbler. [Laughs]

D: Well my grandfather was both.

G: But uh, yeah, that's an important distinction, yeah. Uh huh. Do you remem (--) Did you uh, do you remember his shoe shop, or?

D: I surely do, because my dad was in, worked for him and then was in partnership with him for many years. Then my father continued to run the shoe shop after. And my father actually sold shoes too. It became a shoe store until 1951. And then my father sold his shoe store and the time that the old Sherman Block in Williamstown had been sold to the Williamstown Savings Bank. And this old wooden structure, which housed about eight or ten business is the site, was on the site of where the Williamstown Savings Bank is now. And my dad then went to work strangely enough for Sprague Electric Company [G: uh huh] until his death.

G: So, so you're um (--) The shop that your grandfather owned was in Williamstown?

D: It was in Williamstown, right. [G: Uh huh] In fact I was, I say North Adams, because I was born in the North Adams Hospital, but I was in Williamstown all of my life. [G: I see] Except for two years in North Adams when I first, was first married and for three years in the service. [G: Uh huh] And I've lived, I've been a Williamstown person. [Clears throat]

G: Uh, what are your earliest memories?

D: My earliest memories? I guess uh, uh, playing with my older brother. I can, I have memories, preschool memories of you know, just playing with my brother. My parents uh [G: in the house, or?], in the house, around the house. Some of my neighbors, uh, older neighbors that I know. And things of that nature. Playing carpenter and things like that.

G: Did your grandfather, or anyone from your grandfather's generation, do you recall them ever

telling you stories about when they were young, or even when their parents or grandparents were young?

D: Okay, my maternal grandfather told many stories about when he was young. My paternal grandfather, the shoe man in the shoe business uh, could not speak, never learned to speak english. He was an educated man who could read and write. He was an opera [officienado]. He had all kinds of opera records, but he considered himself an Italian I guess and never bothered to learn the language.

G: Do you speak, are you fluent Italian?

D: I cannot speak Italian. Just uh, [G: Uh huh] very, in a very minor way. [G: Yeah] I understand a few words. I can understand french better than I can Italian. But my mother's father told many stories of his youth. He was a uh, a man who uh, in the south, came from the south of Italy. My dad was from central Italy, not far from Rome, and my dad's people. Uh, my mother's people were from the south of Italy and they were peasants. All be it, they were what they call [pubiateri?], they were land owners. They owned their own land. And he was a farmer and came from generations of farmers. And they lived in [unclear].

G: They were big peasants, middle peasant, small peasants, what?

D: Well they were small peasants. [G: Yeah] And in those day the, in the [Atenoicana?] region they, all lived in the village. And it went back to medieval times to protect themselves from wolves and other enemies, or what have you. And they all lived together in the village. And their farmlands were all outside the village. They didn't live on their land. And uh, my grandfather tells me that from the age of six years old he went to work. Never learned to read or write and go to school, and uh, was a young farmer. And uh, grew up to be a farmer. He had uh, three, four brothers and one sister. And uh, at a young age he went to uh, he was called into the service, military service. And he used to be very proud of that, because he served in a group called the [Versaliat?] which was an elite fighting group.

G: That's World War I then?

D: No, this was in (--) Oh, he was born in 1868. [G: Uh huh] And he served in the, [G: (unclear) Lybia?] he went in the service around 1889. He served sometime in Lybia, but he wasn't in action to my knowledge. I think he was in Lybia, but he did serve most of his time around Rome. [G: Uh huh, uh huh] And then he came back after his tour of duty, which I think was two years. And the next thing he got recalled. There was some kind of an uprising in Lybia, or someplace and he got recalled. But he didn't go into combat and he was recalled for about a year. And it was during that period of time, he had married in the meanwhile, that my mother was born while he was away [G: Uh huh] in the service. And he tells the story about (--)

G: So your mother was born in Italy?

D: My mother was born in Italy in 1894. She celebrated her 95th birthday on February 25th. She lives in Williamstown. She has an apartment in Proprietor's Field in Williamstown. That's

where the elderly housing development, those condo-like complexes.

G: When were you born?

D: I was born June 16th, 1923.

G: You don't look that old. [Laughs]

D: My mother's 95. It must be the genes. She doesn't look that, she could pass for 70.

G: Uh huh. Well my mom is 77 and she's working a forty-hour week. So that's (--)

D: Oh great!

G: So uh, okay. Um, where did you go to school?

D: I went to Williamstown, the Williamstown schools and Williamstown High School. And that was the end of my formal education. I went in the service in 1943. Uh, in 1940, yeah 1943. I graduated from Williamstown High in 42, was accepted at Springfield College, had my appendix out, decided the war was on, I'd go after the war. And I went to work strangely enough for Sprague Electric during the summer of 1942, waiting to go in the service. [G: Umhm] And I left Sprague to go to work for the old [Gavrick?] Film Company in Williamstown. And then a few months later I went in the service. Came back from the service, was going to go to Springfield College, because I was interested in Phys Ed and coaching and things of that nature.

G: You had the GI Bill then.

D: And I had the GI Bill. Went back to work for awhile. And that summer I got out in the uh, February of '46. Went back to work. Shortly after that I got promoted to a group leader. I was making good money and very foolishly did not go to college. I kept putting it off. They had summer sessions in those days and you could go the year round right after the war. They had summer sessions during the war and for a year or two after. And I just kept putting it off. I'll go in September, I'll go in January and I never did.

G: You, you've had no formal education beyond high school?

D: I had no formal education beyond high school.

G: I'm very surprised. I mean you seem from the brief time we've talked you've seemed very [aridite?]. And do you (--)

D: I am an avid reader.

G: You read a lot. What do you like to read?

D: Right now (--) I used to read a lot of fiction and a lot of non-fiction. But right now I'm

basically non-fiction. I read politics, history [G: uh huh]. Uh, I do read some good books of fiction. I just recently read Huckleberry Finn again.

G: That's got to be (--) I think it's a tie between that and Moby Dick for the great american novel.

D: Yeah, yeah. But I was, I loved F. Scott Fitzgerald. I used to read, I read a lot of his stuff. [G: uh huh] Hemmingway.

G: After we shut the tape off, one of the things that we're doing in this project is that we're having a reading program. We're having the reading group. [D: Umhm] Very short things, but have discussions afterwards. [D: Umhm] And you might be interested. Anyway I'll show you our leaflets on it. [D: Okay]

Uh, did you (--) My (--) I'm kind of a carpet bagger around here. [D: That's okay] Uh, but my impression is that Williamstown is a real old wasp Yankee town. Uh, did you experience any ethnic prejudice, or discrimination as a young person, or at any point.

D: No sir. [G: No] And I'll tell you why. If I did it was so subtle that I, it was, that I couldn't recognize it. [G: Uh huh] Um, I uh, Williamstown is a waspy town. It is a well-to-do town. And even in those days the people that inhabited Williamstown were the Prentices who was, Mrs. Prentice was Alter Rockerfella's daughter, Jan D. that ran Mt. Oak Farm, Colonel Prentice. Uh, during uh, Cole Porter lived there at one time. [G: Yeah] The Hoyts were a wealthy family who lived there at one time. The Jeromes lived there at one time. Uh, Jennie Jerome was Winston Churchill's mother. [G: Yes, right] They came from Williamstown. The Cluets, my grandfather worked there as a gardener for many years. They were the founders of uh, Cluet Peabody Arrow Shirts. They were from Troy, but they had a summer home in Williamstown. There were a lot of well-to-do, very wealthy people.

G: They're all Yankee Wasps.

D: They were Yankee Wasps, but the Williams, the clan, in fact some of them looked down on the others. [G: Yeah] The Cluets looked down on the (--) My perception was the Cluets looked down on the Prentices, because they were new money and the Cluets went back to uh, [G: uh huh] you know, a hundred years or more. But uh, I didn't (--) And there were a lot of old Williamstown natives. And the great thing about (--) We were used to all of these dignitaries and nothing bothered us. And later with the influx of movie stars, Christopher Reed, he goes down to the theater festival. Mary Tyler Moore can sit in a restaurant on Spring Street and nobody noticed her. Jean Arthur was here for awhile, nobody noticed her. Just say, "hi Jean" to her. And these people love Williamstown, because they were used to wealthy people and they weren't impressed by movie actors or stars [R: right, right] or dignitaries, or anybody else that came. But no, I would say that there were three Italian families in Williamstown. They were all in the shoe business too. The Salvatores, the Diodatis and the [Ferzolas] and my uncle and his family. There were very few Italians here. Never heard the word, any derogatory words. I just, maybe it was there, but I never sensed it. I went through school with a lot of people, [R: umhm, umhm] and never sensed any problem in that area.

G: Uh, do you go to church, or are you active in church, or were you [unclear]?

D: Yeah, I'm active in church. There was a time when I wasn't as a youth, but I'm uh, St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Williamstown. [R: Umhm, umhm] There was no Italian church, so we went to the Irish church. There was a French church. Now they just call them, it doesn't matter what they are, but there used to be the Irish church, the French church, Italian church.

G: And they all spoke Latin.

D: And they all spoke Latin.

G: Now they all speak english. [Laughs]

D: Yeah, yeah. The sermons were in english. And that's why we went to the Irish church, because we couldn't understand French.

G: Right, right. Um, uh, are you married? And when were you married?

D: Yes I am. I was married in 1953.

G: Where is your wife from?

D: My wife is, originally was born in North [Powell?]. Then here family was in uh, uh, North Adams for quite a while. And then she was in Worcester from her mid-teen years until graduated from high school in Worcester. And uh, she (--)

G: How did you meet her?

D: She had one year in college. [G: How did you?] She came back to North Adams because uh, to live with her sister. And she was working at Sprague Electric. And I saw her walk down the isle one day and made a phone call, and that was when I started dating her. That was around 1951.

G: What was your first job?

D: My first job.

G: Working for your father, grandfather?

D: Well not really. My uh, I used to go up. My dad use to say, "if you want to earn a dollar or two, come up on Saturday", and he let me shine shoes at a shoe shine thing in there.

G: I wish they had shoe shine people. [Laughs]

D: And he's let me keep, yup, and he'd let me keep the money. And uh, so if I needed a dollar or two on Saturday, I'd go up and shine shoes. And we used to get fifteen cents I guess. And they'd

throw you a dime tip. And I shined four pair of shoes and I walked out with a dollar, rich as heck. [R: Uh huh] Unlike my grandfather, when my father was fourteen years old he came to this country with my grandfather and went to work at another shoe store in Williamstown. And my grandfather was a shoemaker and cobbler. And my father was sort of like a handyman getting fifty cents a week he tells me, and turn the fifty cents over to his father. My dad let me keep the money when I shined shoes for him. [Laughs]

G: Well what was your first full time job?

D: My first full time job, actually outside of summer work, was at Sprague Electric in 1942. And I worked (--)

G: So you started working and continued at Sprague Electric?

D: I was at Sprague Electric and I think I was getting forty-eight cents an hour in 1942. And I had put in an application at [Gaverts?] in Williamstown, which was handier because I could walk to work rather than take the bus. And after I was at Sprague for a few months I got a call to the [Gavert?] Film Company and they offered me fifty-one cents an hour. I figured I got a three cents raise, so I went to Gaverts. And I was working at the Gavert Film Company when I went in the service.

G: What was your uh, what was your first job uh (--)

D: At Sprague Electric?

G: At Sprague, yeah?

D: My first job was in production. And I, all day long I filed soldering iron tips. You know those little copper tips? Put them in heat and soldered under a certain point so that the (--) Uh, in those days there was, the war was on and there was about eighty-five women in the old block annex at Beaver Street [unclear].

G: That's where you started to work?

D: I started at Beaver Street. And they were uh, we soldered these tips for the women. [G: Umhm] And that was my job.

G: The work was divided by gender? [Unclear].

D: More or less in those days, not so much now. Oh no, that changed over the years. But in those days uh, they weren't divided by gender per say, they weren't told "you can't work here", but women applied for the light production work and men didn't want to work with fifteen women. So they would [G: Uh huh] ask for the heavier work, or the service work, or the filing of soldering irons, and things like that. And pushing trucks and things like that around. At Sprague today you'll see a change to a degree.

G: Um, so that film company, didn't they change names or something? That still exist here?

D: The film company was, came from Belgium. It's a big film company still in Europe. And uh, they came over here in 1938 and I would guess that they saw the war clouds looming. And they had a big film plant. And they had one in Brussels, one in Paris, one in South America, and then they opened in Williamstown, which was an old textile mill which had been closed for a few years. And they came here in '38 and they built up. And at one time both early, just before the war and after the war I'd say they employed about four hundred people. The place was really packed. And during the war they had big contracts, defense contracts with the British Army, [G: Umhm] because they were well known European, [G: right] yeah.

G: Um, what branch of the service did you go in?

D: I was in the army. And I started out as a uh, took basic training. And I started (--) [G: Where?] In Atlantic City, New Jersey.

G: Atlan (--) Not Dicks?

D: No, Atlantic City, New Jersey. [G: Atlantic City] And even though they were mostly Air Corps people there, we were designated to be in the Signal Corps. [G: unclear] And I remember it was all army in those days. They had army air forces [G: right, right] and ground forces and what have you. And I ended up at Camp Crowder, Missouri in the Signal Corps as a radio, uh, taking radio code and also operating radios. And we used to operate radios hand generated in the field. And we were support and communications system for the infantry. And later went to a high speed radio school, because I, I guess I was fairly proficient at code.

G: [Comment unclear].

D: Yeah, [G: Uh huh] and Kansas City, [G: Yeah] Missouri to a civilian school. And while I was there I applied to be a Cadet. And I decided I wanted to be a flier. And they came around and said we need more Cadets. So I applied for Cadets. And after completing that course there I went to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, which was an Army Air Corps Center in St. Louis, near St. Louis, and waited for several weeks to be you know, assigned to a pre-flight school or something of that nature. Never happened. And after awhile they said, "well, for the convenience of the government we're washing out, we've got enough pilots." So I ended up as a radio operator in the Army Air Corps. They sent me to gunnery school.

G: For bombers, heavy bombers?

D: For heavy bombers. I was on B17's in [Humer?] Arizona. And after graduating from gunnery school they sent me to Sioux Falls, South Dakota for a refresher course in radio. Then I went back to [Humer?] and they became what they called permanent party. And the Army Air, the Army Air Corps called the permanent party, the Army Ground Forces called them [cadery?]. And I was in a group that was instructing uh, new gunners coming through. And my job was to be the instructor, because there were radios and such (--)

G: It sounds like you were lucky.

D: I got lucky. [G: laughs] And I was there for about eight, or nine months flying three days a week. And I was instructor for radio operators. I tried several times to volunteer for overseas service. A young friend of mine, we just felt, geese, we've been in the army a year and a half. And their squadron commander said, "you go where they send you and that's it." [G: Laughs] Finally in the summer of 1945 I got assigned to the new B29's [G: 29's] which came out. And I was going to go to the Pacific. We got crewed up and we were all set to go to Marchfield, California for an overseas training unit, work and then on to the Pacific. And in August of '45 they dropped the bomb and they put us on hold. I didn't even get to go to the Army of Occupation, because I'd been in the service almost three years by then and had so many points they wouldn't (--) You had one point a month, or two point for overseas, or (--) [G: right] So, and they said, "you're not even going there." So I went, was transferred to, was it Lincoln Air Force Head (--) Uh, Lincoln Second Air Force Headquarters at Lincoln, Nebraska and then they sent us to bases near our homes. So I was at Langley Field Virginia from October of '45 to February of '46 and then on to Fort Devens and discharged. So I never saw combat.

G: [Few words unclear] you could have gone to UMass. They had a [few words unclear].

D: Uh, that's right. I never saw, I never saw combat except dodging a bottle that was thrown in Mexico at one time. [Laughs]

G: So, and then you, so that you left the service at Fort Devens and came back here?

D: Came back home. And went back to work after I enjoyed myself for eight-nine days. Had ninety days to re-apply for a job. On the eighty-ninth day I reported for work at Gavert's in, the Gavert Film Company back to work. And I think I told you that within a couple of months I got a promotion. They made me a group leader. [G: Yeah] And that, you know, delayed my decision to go to college. And I kept delaying it and finally (--)

G: How did you end up back at Sprague?

D: Uh, the Gavert Film Company closed in 1949. They just weren't getting the business on this side of the Atlantic. Uh, they were in competition with Kodak [phone rings] and they couldn't compete with Kodak. And basically in retrospect I think they came over here just to keep the plant open during the war, because the Nazis came down and took over Belgium and took over their film plants in Paris and everything else. And the only plant they had going was the one in South America, the one here. They tried to compete from 1946 to '49 and then they just threw in the sponge and that's it. And then they finally closed. Uh, I worked two or three jobs after that. I worked for the uh, Bright Water Paper Company. I worked for the uh, Windsor Print Works. And then I worked for the State Highway Department on the highway gang, as a highway engineer, pick and shovel [laughs]. [G: Uh huh, uh huh] And then in 1951, April, I applied for work at Sprague Electric after having left them nine years before, and was hired as a check inspector.

G: And which plant did you start working at?

D: Beaver Street.

G: You started at Beaver Street. [D: Yeah, and] How long did you work at Beaver Street?

D: I worked at Beaver Street for two years. Almost two years. I think uh, let's see, almost two years. And then I went to, I was a check inspector, which was uh, we were the inspectors of a final product working for quality control. And uh, I got engaged to get married. And about that time I was offered a job in product engineering as a spec writer. And that meant that I would transfer to Marshall Street. [G: Uh huh] And that was sometime in '53, April '53. And I think I got married in June '53, something like that. So I got a little promotion and then moved on into something bigger and better.

G: Is that, (--) That sounds like the sort of work that Jack Bolger does?

D: Exactly. [G: Yeah, yeah] I trained Jack Bolger at Brown Street. [G: Uh huh, uh huh] He was my uh, he came in as a young lad and I was the guy assigned to training him.

G: Uh huh. Um, I uh, I understand (--) Actually I read a piece by a William student, Ray Bliss, about the labor relations at Sprague. [D: Umhm] And uh, you were quite active in the, in the union there. You were, uh, when did that start?

D: Uh, okay. I didn't get active in the union until the mid-sixties. I'd been uh, [G: uh huh] I went to a few union meetings. And then sometime in the uh (--) As a matter of fact, Jack Bolger, who was our room representative, he worked for me, suggested that I go down. And uh, they had a couple of openings for the negotiating committee in 1966, negotiations. And Jack suggested I go to a meeting and run for one of the openings, because a couple of officers had quit. And they weren't going to (--) Elections were coming up in January, this was in September. They weren't going to fill those offices, but those people had resigned. Two of them to go in management. And he said, you know, we need some people, why don't you run. So I went down and made a little political speech and ran for the negotiating committee and got elected to that. And then in October of that year, during the middle of negotiations I got nominated for president of the union. Ran for that and won that position in late 1966.

G: Um, what motivated you to become active. I mean I understand what you just said. [Few words unclear] Jack says, you know, why don't you do this, but you could have said no, right?

D: I could have said no. I was always interested in politics a little bit, although I wasn't, I wasn't an [ideologue] as far as unionism went. I mean I wasn't [few words unclear] and waving the old lunch bucket, but I thought that I could make a contribution. I liked to be where there was a little politics and where something could be done I thought in a good way. Uh, I was never an [ideologue] as I say. I was more pragmatic in my things, but I thought that I could do some good. I was interested. It was political. It was also that it had something to do with everyday life. Maybe I was getting a little bit restless. I was uh, in young middle age then. And I, you know, I had a good job, but I, I realized that I was, had reached about my peak. I turned down two or three management jobs that weren't, they were professional jobs, not managerial jobs, that

weren't any more lucrative financially then what I was doing. [G: Uh huh] And I had a family. And I said uh, maybe I can do some good. [G: Right] And I enjoyed politics, history, and that sort of thing.

G: Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh. Uh, at this time the union was independent. It was not affiliated with AFLCIO.

D: The union was independent, right.

G: Uh huh. Um, what (--) Were you at all um, instrumental or active in the union becoming part of the AFLCIO?

D: Yes. Uh, as a matter of fact I became president and the ICW president, and decided that [G: Stackpole or Wood?] (--) Stackpole fought for the independent union. He was the chairman of the grievance committee. And Walter Wood was a new young turk, later on incidentally became my assistant in Industrial Relations. [G: Uh huh] He was a strong IUE proponent. And he had tried to get the IUE in before. And in 1966 uh, right during negotiations he got enough authorization cards he thought, to have an NLRB election, but he wanted to do it quickly. So he had it done through an affiliation move at a meeting. And they voted to affiliate with the uh (--)

G: [Few words unclear] the debates and everything. He took wonderful notes.

D: Yeah, yeah. And he uh, and Walter Wood, the company opposed it. The company felt that uh, at a meeting of even though fourteen or fifteen hundred people, minus ten, there were about twenty-nine hundred union members at the time. There were forty-two hundred people employed by Sprague Electric in '66. And uh, the company opposed it. And it finally ended up in an NLRB election. Meanwhile, my union, which was a big technical and office union of about sixteen hundred, six hundred and fifty people in. They only needed one or two authorization cards and they were also on the ballot. And these different unions all tried to take over the, or have us become affiliated with these internationals. It was the IAM, the IUE, and the AFTE, which later became the IFPTE, I-F-P-T-E, which they are now. [G: Umhm] I opposed going with an international at the time, because I had just become elected president. I knew we needed reforms. I knew we needed a lot of work to be done. I needed, I knew we needed to strengthen, but I said, I didn't just take over so that we could affiliate. I want to serve at least a year and see what I can do. So I opposed it. And we had elections. And then the top two unions in each one of the categories had a, we had a run-off. And it was the IUE against the ICW. And the IUE defeated the ICW, that was the production unit, handily. And um, my office and technical union defeated the IUE by about twenty-five votes. Tough battle. [G: Uh huh] Jack Bolger went for the IUE [G: yeah] and uh, my good friend Jack. And we never became enemies over it, or anything. And I've fought to maintain independence. [G: Uh huh] And it stayed independent until I left in 1969.

And I think we instituted some good reforms, increased the dues. Got people more interested. And uh, there was no (--) Well we signed a contract for three years. So there could be no more interjection by the uh, during that period of time. But uh, that's the way that ended. And I was (--) As a matter of fact I did my best to bring the two factions together. Jack Bolger became a member of the grievance committee. He ran with me and he and I worked very closely together

even though he thought that the Independent Union couldn't get the job done. And in 1969, in January, that was three years after I was president of the union, I was offered a job in Industrial Relations. I had about four days to tell them whether I'd take the job or not. And uh, I talked to Jack and some other members of the committee, and they urged me to go ahead and do it. They thought that with my experience that they didn't see any conflict. My uh, as a president of the union my ideas were to do the best I could to advance the cause of the people, both monetarily and with work conditions. But I also, and I was tough with the company, but I was honest. I also believed in the contract. I didn't try to get things that weren't in the contract. I said, we've got to negotiate for these things. And uh, my whole feeling was, I'd worked like heck in a grievance if the person was right. If I thought it was frivolous I'd tell them, go back to work. That was my theory. Some guys don't operate like that. They, politically they always go ahead for the person and try to ween something out of the contract that wasn't there. Uh, a lot of people said the company offered me the job because I was too tough. Some said they offered me the job because I uh, had opposed the international union. I don't know why they offered me the job. I think they offered me the job because I had done a good job as a president and they respected me. [G: Uh huh] I ended up eighteen years industrial relations. And uh, overall had good working relations with the unions. [G: Uh huh]

G: So, so that you actually left the bargaining unit then, before it went with the international union?

D: Yes I did. [Phone rings] Yes I did. Now I will say this, when I was president of the union in 1966 the IFPTE, which was the AFTE, said that they weren't discourage after the election. They said, we're going to come back. We're going to come back three years from now, after you sign a contract. And they did. And just before (--)

G: [Few words unclear] ninety day window, right?

D: Yeah, yeah, the ninety day window. And I wasn't, I said that's up to you. You know, I wasn't supporting them, or not supporting them, I just took a neutral [poster?] and said, you have every right to. [G: Umhm] And uh, my successor [G: which was, was who?] was Ronald Durant. A guy name Ronnie Durant.

G: Is he around?

D: No, he died about three years ago.

G: Oh, that's unfortunate.

D: And he was [phone rings] chairman of the grievance committee.

G: Just a minute please. [Tape stops momentarily]

D: Ronald Durant was chairman of the grievance committee. And I guess he decided that he'd like to be president. So I had a special election and he was elected president. [G: Uh huh] And Jack Bolger became chairman of the grievance committee.

G: Uh huh, uh huh. Is uh, is there any, is there anybody um, around since Jack, or uh Durant, from this, from the union that you think might, would be a good idea for me to talk with that you can think of?

D: Gee I don't know. Uh, Roger Bell, Jack's assistant. Did Jack mention him?

G: No, I don't think he did.

D: He might uh, he was in, got involved around that period. [G: unclear] A guy named Roger Bell.

G: Uh huh, okay.

D: He's still, he's still at Sprague Electric.

G: Umhm. Uh, so you were, basically you were doing this sort of um, what's the name of the job again that you were doing before you became industrial relation? What was it?

D: Before I became, went into industrial relations, my job was senior product designer, [G: Uh huh] which we designed capacitors. [G: Umhm umhm] Which is what Bolger is doing right now.

G: Right. Did you do any kind of training at all for this, uh, for that position, or was this on-the-job training?

D: That's on the job, on the job training. You work with engineers. And actually a product designer actually becomes an engineer, but in a very narrow sense. He's a capacitor engineer. [G: Umhm] Where other engineers are electrical engineers and electronic engineers. And it's a long period of time. It takes you know, eight or ten years to get somewhere near the top of the, of the job.

G: Um, what, what was um, (--) You were, basically favored that the union not affiliate. [D: Umhm] Um, but I (--) Perhaps I wasn't listening, but I, it's not clear to me why you had that position.

D: Okay. I had just been elected president [G: Umhm] of the Independent Worker's Union. [G: Yeah, right] Of the uh, [G: you had office workers] office workers and technical workers union. I think that's what they called it in time. Is that I wanted to see what I could do to help that union strengthen itself, make necessary reforms, and see what we can do about being a better union without affiliating with the outside people. In truth some of the outside people that I talked with turned me off, because of their attitudes, you know, sort of looking at us. And some of them, not all of them, some are fine people, but some looked at us as country bumpkins. Some of the organizers would try to run [unclear] and belittle everything that had been done in the past. And to me, I said, when I ran for president again, I said, I want to run for president and I want to do

what I can. If I can't do the job for you, then I won't oppose an affiliation. [G: Umhm] And uh, when my term was almost up was when I was leaving, when I was offered the job in industrial relations. Uh, (--)

G: How long did you take, did you have this position in the union?

D: As president?

G: Yeah.

D: From '66 to January of '69.

G: Umhm. What um, how (--) When you were functioning at that level in the union, what proportion of your day, or week was spent with uh, on union business? I mean (--)

D: I would say that I spent at least, during working hours I would say that I spent eight to ten hours a week on union activities, during working hours. Quite a bit at night. [G: Uh huh] Phone calls. [G: Yeah, uh huh] But uh, during working hours (--)

G: You would get (--) That was in the contract, you would get lost time for that, or did the union pay for it, or?

D: The uh, union, the company paid for that, [G: Uh huh, uh huh] and still do as a matter of fact, up to a certain (--)

G: Yeah, usually it's written into the contract.

D: Yeah, up to a certain time. Up to, they give you up to ten hours. Uh, at that time the company had no limitation on hours when the unions were independent. Uh, but they did, once they became international unions and they became, everything was spelled out. How much time, or you know. The government says the NRL, the National Labor Relations Act said that the company must give you all of the time you need, forty hours, but they don't say that the company must pay you. [R: Right.] So the reimbursements for how many hours is negotiable.

G: It's usually negotiated, right.

D: It's negotiable. [G: Um (--)] So I'd say eight to ten hours.

G: Umhm, umhm. And uh, what sort of things did you do? I mean did you uh, process grievances, or what was the (--)

D: Uh, the president of the union under our constitution, enter the grievance procedure at the last step. [G: Uh huh] Usually you had the room representative at the first step. And then the second step a member of the grievance committee. And then the third step, we didn't have arbitration at the time. The company refused arbitration. We fought for it like heck. In fact when the IUE came in they sent three more years before they got arbitration. [G: Uh huh] Uh,

the company was (--)

G: Is this an agency shop, a union shop, or an open shop?

D: This, ours was a uh, open shop at the time. [G: Uh huh] The agency shops came in in the 1970 negotiations. [G: Uh huh] So they were all open shops. Even the IUE from '66 to '70 was an open shop. Uh, so I would get involved in giving advice, should we proceed with this grievance, how does it look to you? After step two I get reports from my people. Here's the company's position, here's our's, what do you think of it? And then when we reach the third step of a grievance we didn't have arbitration, but I negotiated a contract, I insisted on a right to strike. We never use it, because can, you know, a grievance has to be exhausted. [G: Right] You can't just have a company say, that's the end of it and drop it. So the Supreme court had ruled sometime before that we are, if you don't have arbitration you have the right to strike. [G: Umhm] That's jungle warfare. That's what they do with the GE, Pittsfield. But uh, so I'd get in (--) Before we went on notification to strike we had mediation. So I'd get involved with federal mediators. [G: Umhm] We didn't have too many that reached that level, but I was being, always being asked for advice and things of that nature.

G: What were the character of grievances?

D: Uh, basically [G: typical], typical grievance is job jurisdiction, who should be doing the work, should management be doing the work? That was the overwhelming preponderance of grievances. Once in awhile (--)

G: [Comment unclear]

D: Well that would be, especially in the office where there is a very nebulous line, you know. Where does an engineer start and where does a technician end. We had quite a few of them. Overtime grievances. Job posting. Qualifications was a big one in the office unit, because the jobs were mostly technical and skilled jobs. And qualifications mattered a lot more than in production where it's OTJ, you know, in three weeks you learn the job. So uh, I would say job jurisdiction, qualifications, job posting, some overtime, and once in awhile you'd get some exotic grievances, like discrimination, or you know, and that sort of thing.

G: Um, traditionally when you read about open shops, and my personal experience with them, uh, this is very troublesome. Usually people are active in unions. [D: It was with me] Uh, that it's, I guess (--) I mean the simplest way to put it would be that uh, or looking at it even from the outside, it's very difficult to maintain organization when you have an open shop. [D: Umhm] That you know, what is there to motivate people staying in. Did you experience this as a problem when you were president, or ?

D: Well we had (--) In the office, they had, that was a bigger problem with the ICW than it was with us. Um, we were, even though we were 615, or 30 people what have you, we were more tightly knit and um, it seemed, I would say 98% of the people belonged to the union. The dues were very low then. They were ten cents, later twenty-five cents a week. And this is when the internationals were like a \$1.25 a week. And uh, there were, true there were some people that

wouldn't join and it irritated me. There was a technician in particular who absolutely refused to join. He was a good friend of mine. He's an engineer now. And later became an officer in the union. And I negotiated across the table from him in later years. But he refused to join the union until I did something for him. And then he decided that he had told Bolger he would join the union if I would not rub it in and needle him about it. He was a Vermonter, opposed to unionism. [G: Comment unclear] Individual, you know, an old time, old time Yankee, you know? And yeah, this was my big argument point. In my negotiations with the company, I tried for a union shop, or at least an agency shop. And the argument is there. Uh, you're representing them and they're not paying. [G: Right] And uh, or they'll join at the time of negotiation, then drop out. So we tried to get a maintenance of membership for the year, [G: umhm] things of that nature. Uh, the other big thing was arbitration. I'm, as a member of management I support arbitration as a decent way to get things done. [G: Umhm] As a sensible way. Uh, my argument in those days even was uh, as a union member my argument was two people sign a contract, why should one person decide the cases. And uh, arbitration came in during my first year in management. The unions finally got arbitration. They had arbitration for disciplinary action, result in loss of pay discharge, or something like that. But all of the other issues are not [arbitrable], they are not.

G: Uh, was there a kind of (--) Besides the thing, you know, that you were this union president and had to negotiate grievances and spend some of your time doing that, and that sort of thing, did the union have a life? I mean was there a, did it have a kind of institutional life, or organization life that uh (--) [D: Oh sure. We uh] What did it do? What was it (--)

D: We met on a monthly basis. We uh,

G: Was that membership, or executive?

D: Membership. [G: Uh huh]

G: How many people attended a membership meeting?

D: Probably 50 out of 600. Not big. During negotiations, 300, [G: Well I think that's pretty impressive] 300 hundred people though. Well we had little incentives. Two little tickets that we gave. We had refreshment. Then we had two little tickets that we'd give everybody for two free drinks. And the IUE use to serve free refreshments. And that enticed some people to come.

G: Stackpole told me three to four hundred people would come to membership meetings of the ICW.

D: Uh, I would say at the time of negotiations (--) Now you want to remember they had about 3,000/2,900 members.

G: That's still a lot of people.

D: And that was during negotiations. [D: Uh huh] Now during our negotiations I would say that we got 250 and some, once or twice we hit 300 people, which is almost half.

G: Where did you meet?

D: We would meet at the American Legion basically.

G: Over here?

D: Well yeah. It wasn't known as American Legion Drive then, but that was the Legion. [G: Uh huh] And we've met at the Eagles for awhile too.

G: Uh, what was your relationship like with your uh, fellow workers? Would you say, I mean in terms of, what kind of friendships did you develop? Did you develop closer friendships with people off the job, or basically were your friendships on the job?

D: Well my closest friends (--)

SIDE ONE ENDS

SIDE TWO BEGINS

Side two begins with Robert Diodati in mid-sentence:

D: Through my union contacts and through just meeting with ordinary people. [G: Umhm] I developed some full head problems. And a lot of problems never reached a grievance step, or formal meetings. A lot of them are just talking to people, listening to them, explaining to them why they can't or can't do something, or why something is happening. And uh, that sort of thing. So yeah, I made some friends. As a matter of fact uh, the uh, tenure of service was only one year. So I ran three times and I ran unopposed twice. So I think that uh (--)

G: The first time you ran against someone?

D: Uh, I think, I think I ran unopposed three times. That's it. Nobody ran the first time, because Ronald Durant was the logical guy to run, but he thought that the power rested in the Chairman of the Grievance Committee. Because in the ICW the Chairman of the Grievance Committee had more power. And the president was the gavel guy and never went to grievances or anything. But when I read the constitution carefully, and our constitution said, that a president of the Office Worker's Union, Technical, Semi-Technical Office Worker's Union was a member ex-officio of each and every standing committee. An ex-officio is not just a [tawry] word. It means by virtue of his office. And these guys had misinterpreted that. Mr. Durant was surprised when I became president and found out who had the power. And then the next two terms I ran unopposed. So I ran unopposed three times.

G: Um, besides we talked about the membership meetings as a kind of part of the social life in the beginning. [D: Umhm] Were there any other sort of aspects we (--)

D: Yeah, we had meetings of the representatives to try and show them how to process grievances. [G: Uh huh] To work with them. To help them interpret the contracts. We had (--)

Those meetings were at least, oh, at least every two months we would meet with the uh (--) And the grievance committee would meet and discuss all kinds of issues and things. [G: Besides] And we tried to educate the people through these meetings and through their representatives.

G: Uh, did you, did you ever use any sort of outside assistance, like lawyers, or you know, labor center kind of thing, or anything like that?

D: Uh, I wanted to, to do that. And uh, I only got to negotiate one contract, because it went for three years. And my things was to get a lawyer, and to get a labor lawyer, not just a local guy who was good at divorce cases. And I think that would have happened. [G: Uh huh] I think that would have happened I'm sure, had I stayed on. I don't know what would have happened if I were still president and happy. Knock down the door again like they did a few months after I went into industrial relations.

G: There are a few other local unions in the immediate region that are, that are affiliated. There maybe some that are unaffiliated, I don't know.

D: No, I don't think there are right now. I think they're (--)

G: Uh, did your uh, did your union have any kind of contact with these other locals for any reason whatsoever?

D: Uh, only with the local in Pittsfield, which was AFTE.

G: The GE Local?

D: The GE Local, they had a drafters union, which was with AFTE [G: Uh huh]. And they had an Office Workers Production Planners I think, that were with the whole AFTE. Uh, we didn't have that much in common with the IUE, which were basically production unions. See we were in a large office group. Now you want to remember that most office groups, even today, are not organized. [G: Sure, yeah, (unclear)] Pittsfield, GE is not organized. It's [unclear]. And uh, the only office groups that were organized were the drafters and the production planners. Now Sprague Electric, we were organized not only with draftmen, with spec writers, technicians, the mail room, secretaries, computer operators, [G: Uh huh] the whole gamut. So we were actually way ahead of it as far as unionism went, of even GE [G: uh huh], which is not organized to any extent with their office people.

G: But you did have some contact with other white collar locals?

D: With the two white collar locals in Pittsfield, yes.

G: What was the nature of that contact?

D: Well they would try to encourage (--) Well during uh, in 1966 when the IUE was trying to come in and the IFPTE and IAM and everyone else also threw their hat into the ring to get our, to get our union to throw in with them. The AFTE union, their president came to see us, uh, the

two presidents as a matter of fact, and tried to present what AFTE had done for them and so forth. And so we had contacts with them. Not in a regular nature, but two or three times. Uh, their two presidents would be in contact with us.

G: Um, what do you think of the charge that the independent unions were company unions?

D: Uh, they weren't company unions. It all depended on the leadership. There was, I saw no(--) I saw some presidents in my union prior to me who I felt could have done a better job. Whether I'd say they were company unions, or whether I thought that they were uh, didn't do as good a job in negotiations as they might have done, or whether they were in it for different reasons than to promote the welfare of the union, I'm not going to say, but I'm going to say that I didn't always see competence. Uh, but I haven't always seen competence with uh, international unions either. The local, the local leadership is the thing. I've learned that, uh, that can change the personality. I wouldn't say that, with the ICW it's hard for me to analyze because I wasn't with them. And I'm not going to say that they were, or weren't a company union in the old days. I think Stackpole is a bright man who did some good for the union. He was highly criticized. He was criticized because the ICW was slow in getting pensions in. And he was criticized for quite a few things, but to say that it was a company union, I would not say that. Because in 1945 when I was still in the service he led a strike [G: yes] against Sprague Electric, where they were out for about nine weeks. And um, that doesn't tell me that he's a company guy. [G: Yeah, yeah] I think they may have criticized his methods. They may have said, well maybe they weren't as sophisticated as the internationals in their negotiations and that, but I've heard that, that they were company unions. But you know, he never signed a contract without the people voting for it. [G: Umhm, umhm] And the company also had a good move and that it used to give a bonus every year. A hundred dollar bonus if you'd sign the contract. [G: right] That was beautiful around Christmas time when people were making fifty bucks a week, you know? That was like two weeks pay. [G: Right] And that's a good ploy! [G: Right] And I've seen leaders of the Independent Unions, various ones say, let's hold out against that and let's try to get something in our base pay that will go on and on forever. And from that vote the people you know, (--)

G: It's hard to tell.

D: So it's hard to tell. I you know, I've heard criticisms of IUE and IAM unions of people saying, well they're a company union because they didn't think the president was strong enough, but that, you know, that's the leadership. [G: Right] How does the leadership operate?

G: Um, speaking about (--) In both instances, both when you were in the bargaining union and later on when you became, when you went into industrial relations, [D: umhm] um, what was your relationship to your bosses? How did you feel about your immediate supervisors and the corporation?

D: My relationship because I'd come from the union?

G: No, I (--) Basically, first of all when you were still in the bargaining unit, and then later on as a member of management you still are part of a hierarchy. [D: Yeah] What are your feelings about your immediate supervisors and the company in general. [D: Well] In both instances if

they changed, especially that's important.

D: Uh, I don't (--) If there was a change it was a subtle one. I never thought the company (--) I always thought Sprague Electric was a good company to work for. I wouldn't have worked all of that time for them. [G: Umhm] Uh, my bosses were, in the office you want to remember they were also my friends and they are Jack Bolger's even today, because you work with them everyday. [G: Right] You were all white collar. [G: Right] This guy is sitting at the desk in this office and you're in this office, and he's the boss, [G: It's hard to have an adversary relationship] and it's hard to have an adversary relationship even in negotiations today. The negotiations are different. The office can be just as tough. As a matter of fact they're the ones who led the strike in 1970. [G: Yeah] They're the ones that struck first. But they're not table pounders, or you know? [G: Uh huh] You discuss issues in a more quiet gentlemanly way, because (--) And there's just not that (--) In production so much depends on the foreman. A foreman can be an envoy for that company and get cooperation, or he can be up here. And some are and some aren't. [G: Umhm] And it's uneven. It's uneven in production. It all depends (--) The foreman is so important. He's much more important in a production atmosphere than he is in an office, because in an office you're doing the same work. And it's not, you do this, [few words unclear]. That stuff, everybody knows their work and they do it. It just flows. [G: Umhm] And there's uh, it's a different atmosphere. So I can say that there wasn't you know, much of an adjustment for me as far as my immediate uh, superiors went. And there certainly uh, my idea of Sprague Electric was, that isn't a good company to work for, but they're trying to make a profit and if they can make a bigger one, fine. And it's up to me to get my share of those profits. [G: Umhm] It was just a pragmatic thing more than an idealogical one as far as I was concerned. And that's the difference between an office relationship.

G: Umhm, umhm. Um, we talked a little bit about what you did when you were, oh uh, when you were in the bargaining unit. The kind of work you did. Technical work. [D: Umhm] Um, could you describe when you uh (--) After you went into industrial relations can you describe your working day? What did you do then?

D: All right. Well I can describe it by telling you what happened. First of all, an industrial relations manager is in charge of the hiring process. All hourly hirings are his responsibility. I had a production mana (--) an employment manager, but ultimately my responsibility. They're responsible for merit increases, or (--)

G: Does that mean that you personally interviewed every [unclear] employee?

D: No, no. No, no. I would interview some spot interviews, but basically I had [G: you oversaw [unclear] people] manager, I over-sought. And my employment manager did most of the hiring. I'd do it when she was on that and the woman was on vacation and vice versa. But, I handled labor relations, I handle grievances, I was in charge, overall charge of the hiring process, the job bidding system all came under us. Uh, the benefits, insurance, pensions, security, the guards, uh, safety was a big thing. OSHA and all of that. As time went on affirmative action programs. EEO. I had to develop our program for affirmative action.

G: What does it mean to do that? I mean it sort of (--)

D: What does it mean to do that?

G: Yeah. I mean how (--) [D: All right] I mean a friend of mine asked me about my job. He says, well how do you spend your day? Well you do. [Laughs]

D: Okay. Well it's hard to tell in a day. I come in, maybe twenty phone calls a day. [G: Uh huh] Meetings on uh, grievance meetings. Meetings with union officials. Met with each of the presidents probably on the average of once a day with different problems.

G: That might be like handling a grievance, or something?

D: It might be like handling a grievance. I might have (--)

G: Just stop there for a second, because we have an example of you as a, as a uh, um, union president presenting a grievance to somebody who you later become. [D: Yup] Right? [D: Right, absolutely] I mean uh, what is your at, what is your attitude about this? You're looking at this grievance now that Jack Bolger is presenting to you, or whatever. [D: Okay] I know what he's told me about, or even what you've told me about it. Your job is that you think that this is a legitimate case here. You want to fight for it, but now you're the industrial relations guy. And what is your mandate here from the company, for this grievance typically?

D: All right. We didn't have too many written grievances. Now you want to remember as industrial relations manager now I've got a bigger umbrella, because I'm also with 1500 IUE guys [G: right] listening to their grievances. With the office, typical a Jack Bolger as president. He was, he became president. There was another president [Macklin?] and then Bolger. Uh, Roger Bell, chairman of the grievance committee, typically we had a very informal relationship. We avoided writing up grievances. I would get a call from one of the grievance committee man saying, Jimmy Fitz in the sales office is doing this. And he's done this, or he's done that. And I think he's wrong. He's not following the contract. He hasn't reviewed Mary Jones for a merit increase on an annual basis. And would you take care of it before he have to write it up. Well then I might call Jimmy and say I'll drop over and see you. What's the problem Jim? Well I'm not going to do a merit review, because she's at the top of the ladder. She can't get anymore money except for union increases now. We had step reviews you know, and you know, like the teachers do. So many steps. And he would say, what's the sense of a merit review? A contract calls for one and you should have a merit review, because that person may even be slacking off now that he, or she's reached the top. [Phone rings] Let them know where they need to pull in the reigns, or do something better. Go back to Bell and say, it's all taken care of. Jimmy's going to take care of it. Uh, the, typically the office bargaining unit, which from 1970, after the strike on, only numbers about 350, 370 people. Typically I'd get ten, or eleven from grievances a year that would go through the process. Now let's say it went to the second step. I would be at the second step meeting and I'd also be at the third step meeting. They'd bring in their whole committee at the third step. And the manager, or the department manager, or the senior department manager would be there and listen to their grievance. I'd sit there and listen to both sides of the story. Would [phone rings] not take the company's position. So. Are we on? [G: yeah, we're on now.] [Apparently tape was turned off when phone rang] So typically I would

listen. I would try to take a neutral posture. I felt that as industrial relations manager I worked for the Sprague Electric Company, which is made up of managers and employees. And I should make a fair and just decision, and a right decision based on the contract. If no contractual language, then something that was fair and equitable. So I would listen. I wouldn't jump in on the side of management. Even though I heard management's story before I went in. I would just listen to the two sides debate the issue. And if the union had, was convincing me, or was in the act of convincing me that they were right, you had to be diplomatic enough not to embarrass the manager, [G: Umhm] and say you're wrong, these guys are right. There might be caucus. We might come in. And it might not be settled that day, but the next day the manager might call and tell them, I think you're right, [G: Umhm] not Bob Diodati. Even though I convinced them. [G: Yeah, right] You know, he had the say. [G: Kick-in] And the union would do the same thing. The president of the union would not embarrass a steward by shooting him down in front of me. But later on they'd say, you get back to us with yours and we'll let you know. And they'd either drop it or not. So once I was con(--) You know, during a grievance is a many negotiations. You're actually negotiating. You can't change the contract, or do something that is going to uh (--) But what you're trying to do (--)

G: But it's interpreted too, right?

D: It's interpreted and you're trying to solve a problem. [G: Yeah] Now once you go through that third step, and I'm convinced that management is right contractually and every other way, past practice, or whatever else [G: umhm] comes into play. Then I, within seven days write a letter to the union and say, the company has reviewed this and we feel that we have not changed, or abridged, or violated the contract. [G: That was it] Then the union has like thirty days to let us know whether they are going to arbitrate or not. Now once you start arbitration, now it's war, you know. You don't try to (--) When you got to arbitration you're firing away [G: right, right right] at each other. It's like court. It's like a lawyer, two lawyers. That's why lawyers basically aren't very good negotiators. When they're negotiating they're trying to solve a problem. When they're in court they're trying to make you look bad in front of the judge and jury. [G: Right] And so that's why you do. And that doesn't mean that you aren't willing to talk to the union off the record. And we do many times. And we say, I'll do this if you do this, and try to avoid an arbitration. Sometimes we compromise. And probably, I would say that nine out of ten times when the union has notified us they are going to arbitration, we reach a settlement prior to arbitration. [G: Uh huh] And uh, both sides look to do that. But once you go into arbitration, once you sit down and your [few words unclear], now it's war. You go to win. You do everything you can to discredit them. So right up until arbitration (--)

G: There are some unions actually take the position that they oppose binding arbitration because of the precedent setting character. You know, if a precedent is set, that it's not in their favor [D: exactly right] than they're in fact in a much weaker position ever for negotiations later.

D: Exactly right. And unions don't like to go, but they will go. And one of the things with the union is the political pressure, especially today. It's so great. People (--) Either the president of the union has got more pressure I would say when he had when I was president, because people are in a suing mode. [G: Uh huh] [Unclear] to represent. I'll go to the NLRB. I'll get a lawyer. And these guys, if they ever want to get re-elected again, they have to consider that. And

sometimes they'll go to (--) They'll go through the procedure and just hope that we can come up with some kind of a compromise to save face with everyone. [G: Right] And uh, you're right. Uh, it does set a precedent. There's no question about it. The company would like to see if the company loses they're hoping, and the arbitrators generally are cooperative if they've got a tough case, where there's an equitable settlement, more than contractual language is nebulous, most arbitrators will settle the thing as in a narrow vein as possible. [G: Right] Because first of all, they want to lose the union business, because most of the grievances are brought by the union, and arbitrators are, come from the union side of the fence. But also they want to have to work for that company again and they try not to destroy what could be a company prerogative. So it's become an art. [G: Right] And it's even more difficult than it was, because right today in my tenure in almost twenty years in labor relations, there's more lawyers involved as arbitrators today. [G: Right] And in my day they were college professors, teachers, lay, and I like that better.

G: Well the body of labor law (--)

D: The lawyers, the lawyers get into it and (--)

G: The Body and Labor Law seems to grow geometrically by the day. [D: Yeah] I mean at least every time you look them shelves are bigger.

D: Well look around. Look at your panels now. Nine out of ten of them are lawyers. [G: Yeah] They were teachers and professors [G: right, right] and scholars and those, in my day.

G: Um, what(--) How about working conditions at Sprague, both when you were, you know, before you went into management and as a manager, how would you describe working conditions?

D: I don't think anybody will say that Sprague conditions are just fine as far as I'm concerned. I don't (--) The unions, even Mr. Bass who can be very [augmatic] [G: right] is not going to tell you labor conditions are bad. He may have an argument with a certain foreman, or boss, but on the whole it's a decent place to work. Uh, it's not a place of uh, far, far, far from a sweat shop. It wasn't the highest paid place even around here many years ago, but there was a feeling of, well it was really a paternalistic feeling at times when the Sprague's were there and there was a feeling of unity. And even when they were fighting over contracts and things of that nature, a Sprague person was a Sprague person. And I think the old timers will tell you that they loved it there, even through the years. They didn't get rich, but uh, one way the company had of uh, compensating the hourly rate was a nominal hourly rate, but overtime up until our tough times in the late sixties. Overtime, everybody could put 45, 50 hours a week. And uh, it was a family type thing. There was a lot of brothers and sisters, and mothers and daughters, and fathers and sons. It was uh, working conditions are good compared (--) And I've worked in three or four other places. It wasn't that us against you kind of an attitude. Sure there might be an individual foreman who was tough, or an individual worker who was tough to work with, but on the whole working conditions were pretty good.

G: Um, I'm interested, I'm pretty well aware and people I think are for it, have been willing to

talk about it, that how folks felt about unions in Sprague. I've got over thirty interviews and there's been a lot of discussion about that. [D: Umhm] I have very few interviews from people who were in supervision, or management. And I would like to know (--) I'm not asking you to name names or anything, but what is the, what was the discourse on unions like within management? I mean how, what were the feel that you sort of, official feelings, or what we've talked about that you know, about, people's feelings about unions?

D: Okay. Well most of my, didn't have many dissertations on what they thought in general about unions. Most of my perception comes from how they handle different problems. [G: Uh huh] And uh, some (--)

G: Is there anything that is sort of striding to anti-unionism? You know, we're going to smash the unions this year, or?

D: Um, with some managers. And believe it or not a lot of people say that the more educated person was the more, they could understand the problems of the union. Not always the case. Some of my tougher problems were with engineers and scientist simply because of their training and their logic. And their logic said, here's the easiest way to do it. And let's forget the contract. I mean I can do this while I'm doing this, even though I'm not suppose to do it. I'm a (--) Some engineers thought they didn't need technician. They wanted to be their own technician even when they had technicians in the NLRB [unclear], when the certified union says they will have technicians. So I had difficulty, the philosophy there explaining to some of the guys who had Doctorates [G: umhm] can't understand this, because they want to do everything scientifically, mathematically. Here's the shortest distance. Uh, some of the problems that I had when, were uh, some of the foreman who were not that well educated were pretty good with the union, but it all depended on their makeup, their ego. [G: Umhm] Hated to say they were wrong. Hated to have someone come in and say you're wrong. [G: Umhm] Uh, there were some managers who were anti-union, no question. Couldn't understand it. Uh, there were in most respects, most of the managers who grew up around here locally, production managers and people who advanced through the ranks, other than engineers and scientists, accepted unionism because North Adams has union, union, union since the word was invented. [G: Yeah] Automatically they just expect it. But there were, as far as top management at Sprague I never saw, they accepted it. I never saw from R.C. Sprague, Jr. and R.C. Sprague, they accepted. They said, your job is to deal with them. We want labor peace, that's your job. [G: Umhm] Without giving the ship away. Without giving up our prerogatives [claps hands], that's your job. [G: Umhm] And uh, they didn't concern themselves too much with it except at contract time. On a lower level, sure. Um, you had problems. I can tell you this. You had problems on both sides. [G: Umhm] Uh, 50% of the grievances through the years, 50 to 60% were brought by 8 or 10% of the people. [G: Sure] Uh, 50% of the grievances involved about 6 to 8% of management and their problems on both sides. [G: Yeah] You had problem children on both sides. Everything entered into it but what should be done. So you have to face up to that. Sure you had people who would have loved to see the unions go and it would be much easier. But in the United States today, even though the unions are down to 16, 17 million people. [G: 17% is terrible. I mean they're really on their ropes] But they are still (--) They're on the ropes as far as finances and power go, but I'll tell you, two things will keep the United States from ever mistreating their people. The unions did a great jobs. They got a little too strong at one time, now they're a little too weak.

They're almost like a standing army. World War II, between World War I and World War II we had 130,000 [unclear]. But if management tries to ever again take advantage of the people, the unions will spring up again. They're there. They're there to expand. The unions have done two things to hurt themselves. And one of them is, some of them have become a little bit self-serving at the national level. Not too bad. I have a lot of respect for a lot of them, but they helped, they accomplished something for the people. And the non-union plants say, hey man, we're going to do that, or we're going to have a union. [G: Yeah, right] And that is the big thing. The enlightened industrial relations people and human resource people come out, and they come out of whether Cornell, or where they come from, they know that you are going to treat these people right, or you are going to have trouble. [G: Umhm] And uh, the second thing that has hurt the unions as a big organizational group is that they have done such a good job in promoting safety and non-discrimination and things like that, and the government has so many rules and regulations, and so many things that rightly so that control this to make sure that uh, like affirmative action and EEO and things like that, that the union has a [unclear] or something, they put them on the books as law. Things that they had to fight for are now law. [G: Umhm, umhm] Some people say we don't need them anymore. [G: Yeah, right] We've got the law on our side. A manager, you could be working in a middle manager, plant manager somewhere and you get fired, and you might even be under forty, and boy there's a way you can take them to court [G: Yeah] for your civil rights, or something. [G: unclear] You've got to have a reason. [G: Umhm, umhm] And, and so I guess their success has lead to the fact that they are not needed as much. And uh, but I expect that you'll always have unions. You'll never see uh, you know, they're there standing guard. [G: Umhm] And I think that most american businessmen are enlightened enough so that they know what people expect. And the competition is also forcing you to have good benefits. I was at a collective bargaining meeting and a great one in New York. It was chaired by Winston [unclear], who was Chairman of American Can. [G: Unclear] And then he was Post Master General under Nixon and Sheltz. [G: unclear] Winston [unclear] yeah, is that his name? And George Sheltz was there, Secretary of Labor. And Virgil Day from the GE. And Joe Maloney from the Steel Workers. And it was a collect (--) All big guys from labor and management. And uh, they all agreed that on certain principals you know, that things that come a long way and you're never going to go back to the old ways.

G: Uh, you mentioned early in the interview that one of the things that you like to do when you weren't working is read. What are some of your major sort of activities off the job?

D: Off the job? Well, I'm sort of a (--) I'm an old time jock, I used to be an athlete as a young guy. So I play, platform tennis about six times a week. And I play indoor tennis once a week. And in the summer I play at the Williams College courts. I've got a great deal over there. Twenty-four courts, twelve play for sixty bucks. They've got court tennis. All year long, tennis. I visit three sons and their families. I talk politics a lot. I'm not heavily involved in politics, but I talk it a lot. I read U.S. news and world report. I read Time and Newsweek. I read Sports Illustrated. I uh, I'm a sports fan, but also a political fan. [G: Uh huh] I get the New York Times probably about three times a week, because I read it from front page to back. [G: Yeah, it takes awhile] And sometimes it takes me two days. So, especially when something interesting is coming up. And I read a lot. I watch television. I don't watch situation shows too much. I fall asleep. I watch sports and news. CNN, I watch that a lot. C Span! [G: Yes, C Span is wonderful!] Oh jeese, I'm on that all of the time. C Span. And basically that's it. Go to ball

games, visit with my family.

G: Have you seen this uh, do you watch PBS much at all?

D: Uh, yes. I watch it especially when the music. I like the big bands and the jazz period, whenever those are on. But C Span, I probably spend more time on C Span than anyplace else.

G: You're missing the Oli North trial, it must be on somewhere.

D: Yeah, gee, is that on C Span?

G: I haven't check that. Um, did you, were you ever active in, or in any kind of clubs, organizations, associations, civic groups, political groups, etc, besides the union obviously?

G: Okay. I'm a member of the Lion's Club in Williamstown. I'm a member of the Sons of Italy. I guess I have to be [laughs]. Lion's Club, the Sons of Italy, the Veteran's of Foreign War, and the American Legion. I never go to meetings, but I've had, I can go there and have a beer, because I have a membership card. I was a member of the Williamstown Finance Committee for six years. Member of the Board of Directors of the uh, what used to be the Boys Club, now the Williamstown Youth Center. I did that for six years. I was active in little league ball and [schoolerly] ball for kids. And uh, I worked for, do work for the Cancer Society. I drive cancer patients. I work with the, what do we got coming up? The lillies or something we're going to be doing. That sort of stuff. I'm right now a sort of a passive member, I was a life long democrat and I became disenchanted with the democrats, especially during the Jimmy Carter period. And I'm not really, I'm not a real conservative. I'm probably a moderate, moderate, I'd say I'm a moderate republican or sorts. Now my wife is still a democrat. Although she voted for Bush, because she liked his family. But uh, I'm not really active. I get involved a little bit in town politics [G: uh huh]. Once in awhile I'll go to town meetings and spout off, tell them what I think, as an old rascal.

G: Do you have any memorabilia from Sprague and particularly from Marshall Street? I'm thinking, the two things I can think of off hand that I'd be very interested in, in taking a look at if you happen to have it would be issues of the Sprague Logue, or of photographs taken either in or around Marshall Street in particular.

D: Gee, you know I really don't Gabe. I uh, I just got some personal pictures of my office staff [G: sure] and that sort of thing. I really don't. I can check around. Now Sprague Electric, have you talked to anybody who is active at Sprague now? Like Stuart Sutherland? He's the guy (--) Stu Sutherland. Now he doesn't have, he won't have a big historical background as far as Sprague. He's only been here a few years. He's been a friend of, he's my successor. [G: Uh huh, Industrial Relations] Industrial Relations Manager. Now Sprague had a book, had two volumes of Sprague Logues that were put together for old Mr. Sprague that were, that go way back into the, I think the thirties. [G: Uh huh] Now whether (--) They had them at Marshall. Now whether he's still got those, or not, you might check with him. As a matter of fact I can mention it to him. I'll be seeing him in a couple of days.

G: I know that there are complete runs around. And I have loose copies. I have quite a bunch of loose copies.

D: You do have loose copies?

G: What I'm trying to do is, I'm trying to create my own (--)

D: Create your own. Well I don't think they'd part with that, because (--)

G: Yeah, sure. No, they have (--) I mean I'm not(--)

D: You know, they could give you (--)

G: I'm not for taking any, you know, I'm not for taking anything (--)

D: But I'm sure he'd let you go through it.

G: Yeah. I'm not for taking anything from anyone who wants to keep stuff, but one of the things I'm concerned with, like I mean this a wonderful record of the ICW here t, that [unclear] (--)

D: Oh she was their [unclear] secretary for years.

G: She's astonishing!

D: Yeah, she was.

G: But, I mean, if I hadn't been there that could have stayed up in her attic and you know, if something happens to her, so that could end up in the garbage. [D: Umhm] Things like that are valuable for scholars. That's the stuff we use to write books from.

D: Did Novack, or Bill didn't have anything?

G: Bill gave me some stuff, but mostly the kind of stuff that he had was like, which is what I was interested in asking about, he was very active in civic affairs when he was president. Like in Blood Drive and in Community Chest and things like that. [D: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah] And he had a lot of pictures of like himself with, with you know, that were from [D: umhm] clippings from the transcripts and stuff like that, [D: Umhm, umhm, umhm] which were I think, very valuable. But um, you know, what I'm, what I'm looking for, he didn't have any Sprague Logues. Uh, what I'm looking for, I can show you. This is stuff we got in the garbage [too much noise, few words unclear] This is really astonishing stuff.

D: Oh boy, yeah. [G: Laughing] Yeah, I guess.

G: You'll know some.

D: I know them all. I know them all. [G: Yeah] [Unclear] was there, but (--)

G: Sort of things that I had in mind was uh, um (--)

D: Well, I'm going to check with a guy named Hank Wilson, who preceded me at Sprague's by about, at Sprague's by about seven years. And he (--) No, about five years. He may have some things, because he was a collector [G: Uh huh] of that sort of stuff. Let me see if he's got anything.

G: Um, I don't know. This is sort of, this is kind of a loaded question, but it, I don't know how else to get it out. How do you feel, or what is your interpretation or analysis of Sprague pulling out of Marshall Street?

D: Sprague pulling out of Marshall Street. Well, the decision was made to do that. My feeling were that one of, I wasn't happy with it. I had to go along with it, but I wasn't happy with it, because I'm from North Adams and the bigger Sprague is in North Adams, the better for North Adams as far as I'm concerned. Uh, I, I would not have done it, but I'm not in a position to make that decision. I don't think anybody was really happy. Maybe some of the people that made the decision were, or were not happy. I don't know. The argument for it was decentralization. And decentralization means that each one of the plants was self-sufficient, for the fourteen or fifteen plants throughout the country was self-sufficient. And they'd have their own payroll, their own engineering, their own research, everything their own. Now actually when you decentralize it's more expensive overall to run. Because when you can consolidate a computerized system, or a payroll system [G: yeah, right] it's cheaper. But the idea was to let each one of the Sprague plants run almost as an independent entity. [G: Uh huh] And that was the decision. I guess the bottom line was what they were looking for. And they thought that even though there was initially more expenditures, in the long run it would pay off. I would guess that a lot of the thinking for this was agreeable to Penn Central, who were the owners at the time, because Penn Central was a holding company actually. They don't manage. They acquire companies, you manage it. And if it can be managed in such a way that they can identify twelve plants are making money in [unclear], they can always divest themselves in the other three through sales, or whatever. And I think that's the thought behind it. Uh, a lot of industry today is talking about decentralization. However it's interesting to note that General Motors, who have five divisions, only has two now. They used to have the Cadillac [G: umhm, umhm] and the Pontiac, the Oldsmobile, the Chevy and uh, I don't know, which one did I leave out? Oldsmobile [G: unclear], Buick. They had five. [G: Yeah] Now they got two divisions. Large cars and small cars. [G: Right] And no matter if they're Cadillacs, Olds, or what they are. So they've gone the other way. [G: Right] I think the other thing was the Massachusetts Miracle had a lot to do with it. So called Massachusetts Miracle. And everybody wanted to go, have headquarters along route 128. [G: Umhm] Here we're a big electronic, we're a semi-high tech outfit, we should be there too. We always felt that we would be seen more. That we'd be more on the mainstream by being there. That was one of the reasons. But once again that cost money too. And uh, now uh, Lexington is closed and uh, Penn Central started I guess the STI, Sprague Technologies Incorporated, a spin-off from Sprague Electric. They're back on the big board. [G: Umhm] And uh, their headquarters are in Stamford, Connecticut now. So there's [G: yeah] there's been a lot of changes.

Uh, my own guess, I can't be critical, because I don't know if the decision was right, but my,

if I were in charge I would have done it more slowly. I think it cost them a lot of money to do everything on a crash basis. But uh, that's where we are. Whether the right decision was made, or not, time will tell. But uh, from a personal view point I'd still like to see three thousand people working at Sprague in North Adams. That's where I was brought up with. That's what I've lived with. [G: Yeah] Uh, on the other side of the coin, if they hadn't done that Mass MoCA wouldn't be coming in, would they?

G: Yeah, well that was my next question. [D: Laughs] How do you feel about Mass MoCA?

D: I feel great about it. I feel (--)

G: You think that's a good thing?

D: I sure do! Uh, Massachusetts is not a state which manufacturing is increasing. Even with the Massachusetts "Miracle" that we had for awhile, which you and I know is because of the heavy defense spending, it wasn't through any other miracle. Now it's going to precede. Uh, Massachusetts was not growing as a manufacturing state [G: umhm]. And I don't think North Adams future is in manufacturing, with it's old buildings and antiquated buildings, but historically it can be great. I think it's wonderful! You've got Williamstown, you've got Williams College supporting it. Uh, I think it can become a center for culture and I think it will be great! And business wise it can't, if it gets off the ground it can't help but be a success. I think it's a great thing. I can't think of anything you could do other than that. [Interview ends. Tape is left on and begins to record some television news-did not transcribe]